

beard and hair of dark black, balding slightly above the forehead. Each wore a full-sleeved hauberk of maille which stopped just short of the knees, over which was a steel cuirass complete with pauldrons.

At last, once they were but a short distance away, Kalan pulled forth the sword that hung at his side and raised it aloft. At this, the soldiers up front slowed to a halt, those behind them doing likewise in their turn. Then, slowly lowering the blade to his side but keeping a good hold of it, the lord of the Wattier host leaned back in his saddle and surveyed the scene that lay before them.

"Well, Ralknor," he said to the older rider, who sat now at his left hand, "these must be the fierce Ishtrun Clansmen of whom we've been so harshly warned." A grin hinted at a corner of his thin lips as he looked upon the handful of warriors standing mute and defiant in their path ahead. "This is barely worthy of the effort."

"Aye, my Lord," Ralknor said in return, stroking his beard. "They'll fall like golden wheat before the scythe."

"But let's not be too unwary for only a fool thrusts a hand into a hornets' nest to see if it be empty or not," the knight of Harckelort reflected. "We shall test their strength. Send twelve lancemen."

Ralknor sent the order through the ranks, and twelve mounted knights advanced from the rear and cantered out past the rest of the soldiers, who stood their ground and looked on. By now the Balars had grown restless, one having started to beat his shield with the flat of his blade in anticipation, stirring the others to do likewise. Over this din they began shouting out taunts and curses as the dozen lancemen approached. In moments, once the knights were come half way across the field, the Balars burst into a sudden running charge, growling and yelling as battle fury welled up within them, their weapons ready to strike.

In response the knights braced their lances and set their destriers into a fierce gallop, sweeping over the grassy stretch to descend upon their raging foe. The two sides met midfield, the Balars turning aside to avoid the lance points, though in doing so a few were knocked hard to the earth as the horses crashed through their midst.